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Source: *The Journal of American Folklore*, Apr. - Jun., 1990, Vol. 103, No. 408 (Apr. - Jun., 1990), pp. 157-176

Published by: American Folklore Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/541853>

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# The Structure and Interpretation of Fairy Tales Composed by Children

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*The fairy tales children tell differ in fundamental ways from those in the Grimm collection, despite its forming the basis for most children's knowledge of fairy tales. For the children in this study, villainy takes forms other than witches and stepmothers, and a return to a harmonious home is the happy ending par excellence. These and other characteristics of their fairy tales bring into question popular assumptions about the functions performed by fairy tales in children's development and also suggest the need for major revisions to current psychoanalytic interpretations of fairy tales.*

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## *Translator's Introduction*

In a subject that abounds in assertion and counterassertion, this article describes the first empirical study of children and fairy tales based on fairy tales written by children themselves. Because the resulting stories reflect the children's own lives, this study links literature and culture in a manner that is rare in folklore studies. This study also differs from all previous studies of children's writing by the unusual breadth and depth of the sample, which lend the author's account of child-storytelling particular authority.

—RUTH B. BOTTIGHEIMER

## *Fairy Tales and Children*

FOR MORE THAN FIFTY YEARS all sociologically oriented literary inquiries that addressed the reading preferences of the young in German-speaking areas gave rich evidence for children's delight in fairy tales up to the ages of eight to ten. As early as 1923, Charlotte Bühler's Viennese study confirmed the fact that fairy tales were the favorite reading material for eight- to nine-year-olds (Federspiel 1968:124), and almost sixty years later Werner Psaar and Manfred Klein ascertained that "there can be no question of a disappearance of interest in fairy tales either among children or among adults" (Psaar and Klein 1980:159). They corroborate their assertion with a summary of studies carried out up to and

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including the late 1970s in the Federal Republic of Germany, studies that were based on a broad variety of transmitting media.

The German Democratic Republic exhibits similar patterns in the area of children's preference for fairy tales. A 1973 study of the reading preferences of 4,311 children in grades one through four in the G.D.R. revealed that among 15 possible genres, children clearly preferred fairy tales, and within the fairy-tale genre, they clearly preferred those of the Grimm collection (Hüttner, Levenhagen, and Matthes 1977).

In 1986 I asked second, third, and fourth graders (ages eight, nine, and ten, respectively) to write down the names of whatever fairy tales, fairy-tale films, and fairy-tale recordings occurred to them. The children demonstrated a broad acquaintance with fairy tales: 121 second graders named a total of 87 different titles with an average of 8 per child; 77 third graders named 107 titles with an average of 13 per child; and 137 fourth graders produced 103 titles with an average of 15 titles per child. In the same poll children indicated that they had become acquainted with the majority of fairy tales through their own reading. Titles from the Grimms' collection dominated the listings. These data justify Jack Zipes's assertion that "the Grimms' tales, either in their translated literal editions or in multifarious adaptations, play a crucial role in the socialization of children over much of the modern world" (Zipes 1988:110). Further questioning indicated that reading and television tied for first place, with movies in second place among the different forms of mediating fairy tales. The unusually high number of titles the children were able to produce gives evidence for the extent to which fairy tales remain a vital part of children's cultural inheritance in the G.D.R., despite the welter of attractive books, films, and records that compete for children's attention.

Children's interest in fairy tales seems to remain unaffected by fundamental social change, by consequential alterations in life-style, or by profound changes on the cultural and artistic horizon. These factors also leave children's interest in *Grimms' Tales* unaltered. They do not perceive these tales as old-fashioned or alien, which is perhaps unexpected, since *Grimms' Tales* first appeared in a children's edition 165 years ago.

Data from the sociology of literature demonstrate children's preference for fairy tales, and especially for *Grimms' Tales*, at a particular age. The reasons for this phenomenon remain elusive. Psychologists in particular have investigated the causes for the affinity between children and fairy tales. Teachers, on the other hand, have paid—and continue to pay—more attention to fairy tales' effect on ethical and moral attitudes.

I cannot here review the extraordinarily extensive secondary literature on the subject of fairy tales. I would, however, simply like to note that individual authors, depending on their own theoretical and philosophical position, have attributed divergent, even directly opposing, functions to fairy tales. One views the fairy tale as an aid to childhood socialization and enculturation (Bettelheim 1980); others see fairy tales endangering the same process (Bottig-

heimer 1987; Psaar and Klein 1980). Such polarized evaluations about apparently identical fairy-tale material is made possible by the focus of the individual critic, because the individual tales that together make up the Grimm collection (which most commentators take as their raw material) exhibit a broad range of content.

Given the variety of effects attributed to fairy tales, it is surprising that none of the positions taken by psychological or pedagogical critics of fairy tales has been subjected to empirical investigation. The disciplines of literary criticism and folklore have also contributed to discussions of the subject, yet only a minuscule number of studies have attempted to illuminate the effectual components of fairy-tale reception (Köngäs-Maranda and Maranda 1971; Obrig 1933; Sahr 1971; Tausch 1967; Wardetzky and Keller 1986; Wesselski 1931). Max Lüthi's dictum of 1979 is still valid for the current state of research:

Theoretical and practical criticism of fairy tales (*Volksmärchen*), and especially of the suitability of *Grimms' Tales* for the nursery, does not rest on basic research. A statistically valid study to determine the extent of children's acquaintance with *Grimms' Tales*, [and] investigations of their subsequent influence on behavior and worldview . . . remain hypothetical. [Lüthi 1979:94]

The results introduced in this article form part of an empirical study based on a broad sample of data that attempts to illuminate the question of the affinity between fairy tales and children who have grown up in the G.D.R. The methodology rests on the hypothesis that not all of the fairy tales or fairy-tale plots heard or seen by children in the various media are effectively stored, that is, fully remembered. It is far more likely that the fixing of such experiences (by hearing, viewing, or reading these tales) in the child's memory is subject to and is guided by mechanisms of selection, reformulation, and hierarchical ordering, as cognitive psychologists have described these processes. It may be assumed that children remember motivationally neutral elements more briefly and less accurately than those which are associated with acute sociopersonal needs and requirements (Hoffmann 1983; Klix 1973, 1976).

### *Methodology*

I excluded having children re-tell a particular tale as a means of gaining access to their memories of fairy tales. A more suitable method in my view grew out of having children invent their own fairy tales. This method corresponds to the hypothesis that the fairy-tale elements and patterns at the children's disposal are those which have left the most lasting impression, although superimpositions deriving from current experience cannot, of course, be excluded. A high frequency in the use of specific elements and structural patterns among a statistically representative sample of experimental subjects enables one to conclude that these particular elements and patterns exert a special effect on children within the group, in this case a group defined by the age span eight to ten.

In the total study, this procedure was augmented by other standardized and semistandardized procedures (questionnaires, tests) and further independent opportunities for the children to express themselves (drawing). The foundation for the empirical materials, however, remains the stories [*Geschichten*] invented by the children.

The investigation as a whole included 2,470 children in grades two through four (ages eight–ten) in schools located in rural areas, small towns, medium-sized cities, and large cities. Representative samples of the tales composed by the 1,577 children are included in the appendix.

As an impulse for inventing a story, ten different story openers were supplied to the children. These had been developed, tested, and modified in several preexperiment trials by a group of experts (psychologists, teachers, and sociologists). We avoided story openers from *Grimms' Tales* or from other folktale collections, so that the children's fantasy could be stimulated to perform as independently as possible. A few examples follow: (1) "Once upon a time there was a child who played with its favorite toy. Then its mother called it to supper. When it returned, the toy had disappeared, and instead there was a black stone."<sup>1</sup> (2) "Once upon a time there was a child who was playing on the shore of a lake. Suddenly the child blanched with terror, for the water churned and the water foamed. . . ." (3) "Once upon a time. . . . Suddenly. . . ." (4) "Once upon a time there was a grown-up girl. She left her parents and went out into the world. . . ." (5) "Once upon a time there was a grown-up boy. He left his parents and went out into the world. . . ."

These story openers proved to be very effective activators. Only 5% of the eight-year-olds felt unequal to the task of producing a narrative. The others accepted the request to write a story as a challenge that they took up with visible enthusiasm.

The stories were written down by the children in June of three succeeding school years (1986–88). They were composed during class time, but without their teachers' influence. The teachers stimulated the children to write by means of the following binding instructions:

You know lots of stories which adults have made up for you. These people are now curious about what sort of stories children themselves make up. Why don't you write a story that begins . . . (here one of the ten story openers would be used). As you write you don't need to worry about neatness or spelling. If you don't know how to spell a word, then just write it the way you think it should be. The only thing that's important is that you have fun writing the story.

All the teachers were requested to adhere strictly to these instructions. This, of course, could not be checked, but I have every reason to believe that the teachers cooperated fully. In the instruction to the children I intentionally introduced the concept "story" [*Geschichte*] rather than "fairy tale" [*Märchen*] in order to test the extent of children's inclination to develop a fairy tale from one of these story openers. Among the narratives produced by the children I distinguished fairy tales from non-fairy tales by means of two criteria: (1) brack-

eting the time and place of the narrative outside of reality; and (2) the use of magic elements (enchantment, miracles) and otherworldly beings. Based on these criteria, 616 (76%) of 805 stories told by girls and 539 (70%) of 772 stories told by boys belonged to the fairy-tale genre.

Certain limits inhere in the procedure of having children write stories of their own. The first lies in the children's differentially developed writing talent. The impediment of writing constrains their actual capacity to invent stories freely. Organizational limitations, however, made it impossible to record a similar number of oral stories [*Erzählungen*]. Despite the limitations peculiar to writing, children had to write down their own narratives, since it would have been impossible to muster the staffing necessary to record and transcribe a sample of 1,500 narratives, the number necessary, in my view, to achieve reliable results.

A second difficulty lay in the quantitative evaluation of these stories. To achieve statistically utilizable data, I borrowed from the method developed by Vladimir Propp in his morphological description of the magic tale (Propp 1975) to devise categories that could be measurable, that is, identifiable and quantifiable in terms of their appearance. Formalization, that is, the consequent structural analysis to which the children's fairy tales were subjected, is a technical means for identifying recurrent elements and isomorphic structures that are characteristic of the majority of the children's tales [*kindliche Märchen*]. Formalization and its application to quantifiable data were intermediate steps necessary for approaching the question of the psychological function of fairy-tale reception in children's socialization and enculturation with respect to verifiable evidence.

### *The Outline of the Children's Fairy Tales*

The essential difference between the European magic tale [*Zaubermärchen*]<sup>2</sup> and most of the children's tales is length. Children in the study abbreviated the action maximally and reduced the functions and characters to a minimal level. With very few exceptions the children's tales are reasoned constructions that hang together logically. In their poetic qualities and in their boldness of fantastic image and construction the majority of the children's tales are not inferior to the European magic tales. What distinguishes their structural individuality is the way in which they graft paradigmatic fairy tales onto an archaic and basic pattern that consists of a nucleus of elementary syntagmatic units.

Two minimal and two maximal<sup>3</sup> variants emerged, between which there exists a great range of intermediate forms. The two following structural patterns underlie the minimal variants:

1. Isolation of the protagonist—*threat by a villain*—the protagonist proves her(him)self—(subsequent support of magic helper)—transformation of the original circumstances.

2. Isolation of the protagonist—*abandonment/loneliness*—the protagonist proves her(him)self—(subsequent support of magic helper)—transformation of the original circumstances.

These two patterns are variants of the same basic pattern, with an interchangeable nuclear conflict, that is, threat by a villain or abandonment/loneliness (in italics above).

The cast of characters in the children's tales is equally minimal, at times consisting of only two characters. In tales with an external conflict there is a protagonist and a villain; in tales with an internal conflict, a protagonist and a helper or rescuer.

In contrast to the 31 possible functions and the 7 characters of the Propp model, the children's tales occasionally have only 4 functions and 2 characters. Even these minimal variants, however, are valid fairy tales. The tales composed by the youngest children, eight-year-olds, consist of a basic stock of recurrent elements and characters and are, above all, maximally abbreviated outlines of classic European magic tales. Clearly, a basic structural outline forms itself from the great variety of fairy tales that children encounter, a structural outline which the eight-year-olds in particular utilize intuitively as a pattern for the tales that they themselves spin.

The majority of nine- and ten-year-olds compose expanded variants of the European magic tale. In so doing they appear to refer to the following two patterns:

1. Isolation of the protagonist—meeting with the victim of a villainy—mediation (misfortune or lack is made known)—beginning counteraction—departure—meeting with the helper—reaction of the protagonist to the helper—receipt of magic object—spatial transference, guidance (the hero is transferred, delivered, or led to a searched-for object)—struggle—victory—restoration (the initial misfortune or lack is liquidated)—return home and/or wedding and/or mounting the throne.

2. Isolation of the protagonist—meeting with the victim of a villainy—mediation (misfortune or lack is made known)—beginning counteraction—expanded counteraction—transformation of the victim—restoration (the initial misfortune is liquidated)—return home and/or wedding and/or mounting the throne.

In its concrete manifestation, the first formula embodies the fairy tale of the dragon-killer, the second principally that of the animal bridegroom. (The concept of animal bridegroom here refers to all the children's tales in which a male character is turned into an animal, otherworldly creature, or horror-inspiring figure and is rescued by the female protagonist.) The frame (isolation, meeting, information—cancellation, return) is obligatory in both patterns; the intermediate steps (expanded counteraction, transformation) are variable.

The first variant (1) corresponds neatly to an abbreviated form of the Propp model of the introductory and concluding segments of a fairy tale. All of the



children's tales based on this model correspond to the "male model" (Holbek 1987:162–166) of the dragon-killer. The second variant (2) occurs in the female counterpart to these tales. Here it is always female characters who act as the central figure, in contrast to dragon-killer fairy tales with their male protagonists. Female protagonists prove themselves not in battle against an opponent, but in rescuing the bridegroom, brother, or male friend.

The tales following the "female model" form a different basic type from that described by Propp (see below), because the "male" and the "female" basic type differ substantially from one another in their central functions. A physical coming to terms with an enemy, that is, a battle/victory sequence, lies at the center of the children's dragon-killer fairy tales, whereas rescue is at the center of their animal bridegroom fairy tales. The central motif of the animal bridegroom fairy tales, disenchantment, is the female counterpart to the motif of battle in the children's dragon-killer fairy tales. The heroine's magic omnipotence corresponds to the hero's physical omnipotence.

The children's tales move within the parameters set by minimal and maximal variants and exhibit, among the four variants, the most unexpected contaminations. The children often treat traditional patterns quite unconventionally, inventing variants that are highly original. In sum, the children's tales represent 1,577 variations on the basic patterns described above. Each of these tales is independent, and none can be confused with any other. Each bears the unmistakable mark of its inventor.

Development from the minimal to the maximal variants proceeds, in formal terms, via quantitative expansions, such as the repetition of tests and trials or an increase in the number of syntagmatic units and/or the introduction of encapsulated plot elements within the frame of the primary opposition between the protagonist and his or her counterpart. In this respect there are distinct parallels to the development of narrative structure of tales told by children described by Brian Sutton-Smith (Sutton-Smith 1981). He cites a work in which Botvin organizes 60 stories [*Geschichten*] by five- to ten-year-old children according to a structural system. His system includes the following steps: a fragmentary step; the appearance of the primary dyads of villainy and lack, one per story, with several other secondary elements; the increasingly systematic arrangement of the secondary elements in an intermediate position between the dyads; increasing the number of primary dyads; expanding each of these dyads with appropriate secondary elements; and the development of embedded primary subplots within the major dyad, and multiple subplots. All of the steps after the first (a fragmentary step) are to be found in the fairy tales told by children in my sample as well as in his analysis.

In qualitative terms the maximal variants produced by children in my study are distinguished from their minimal variants primarily by the introduction of another heroic category. In this type the protagonist meets another victim whose destiny requires his assistance, whereas in the minimal variants, even in their expanded form, the protagonist is himself the victim of a villainy or



of a lack. In the maximal variants the protagonist is transformed from victim to rescuer. Another's misfortune rather than the protagonist's motivates the heroic act. The protagonist no longer battles primarily to save his or her own life and to maintain his or her own interests, but to save the life and to safeguard the interests of the Other, that is, a member of the opposite sex. This transformation of the heroic type is the generative force that alters the structure of the children's fairy tale and leads it to a more complex structure.

### *The Main Characters in Children's Tales*

The first decision made by children writing fairy tales consists of thinking up a character who stands in the center of the action that follows, and making it real by conferring a name on it. Whether the children decide on a protagonist of their own sex or of the opposite sex depends on the story opener that they are offered. If the situation indicated for the story is linked to associations with repression and/or becoming overcome by anxiety, then the children—boys and girls equally—devise a story with a girl as protagonist. If, however, the situation indicated in the story opener suggests sovereignty, autonomy, or personal initiative, then the plot is developed primarily in conjunction with a boy. Expressed concisely: if from the story opener the child can be understood as a victim, then children see the character as a girl; if, on the other hand, the protagonist matures beyond childhood and leaves home freely in order to seek a confrontation with the world, then a boy is chosen as protagonist.

In Propp's terminology suffering [*leidende*] protagonists are preponderantly girls, the seekers [*suchende*] preponderantly boys. In this instance it must be firmly emphasized that the concept "suffering" is not to be understood as identical with inactive. In conjunction with these distinctions there are evident parallels to children's favorite fairy tales. For example, in "Red Riding Hood," "Snow White," "Sleeping Beauty," and "Cinderella" the protagonist is both female and a victim, while the dragon-killers who prove themselves in the world are male figures.

Intentions related to a child's personal identity appear to exist in camouflaged form behind the decision to create a protagonist of the opposite sex. For example, when boys introduce a female protagonist into the action as a victim, their characters do not in any way copy "Sleeping Beauty" or "Snow White," for instance, but rather depict a character in flux. Initially pinched with anxiety, the very incarnation of fear, the boys' girl protagonists change in the course of the action from victims into heroes of the same rank as dragon-killers. The boys' girl heroes are then capable of actions that the girl writers in the sample never impute to their heroines. The boys' female protagonists defend and assert themselves in a thoroughly "male" fashion (see below). They are male heroes wearing a female mask. They embody a behavioral role which is closely bound to that of male protagonists in European magic tales and which clearly distinguishes itself from the behavioral roles that the girl writers in the sample utilize for their female protagonists.

When the girls in the sample begin their fairy tales with a male protagonist, they do not imagine the male hero anywhere except within the coordinates of a dyadic (love) relationship. In these fairy tales, a second, female, figure soon appears, and the thematic core of the action becomes the path leading to the union of the two figures. Choosing a protagonist of the opposite sex represents an initial detour for girl storywriters, and it allows them to articulate their heroine's claim on an extraordinary hero who puts his life into the balance on her behalf.

In stylistic terms the children do not write from a narrative perspective of distance or of superiority. Separation between protagonist and narrator is frequently collapsed, as the child writer slides into a first-person narrative or else designates the fairy tale as a dream at the end.

A fundamental peculiarity of the heroic type created by the children is evident from the following facts: the children in my study never wrote fairy tales in which the hero learns from his mistakes. On the contrary, in their fairy tales they simply didn't acknowledge a hero's mistakes.

In their stories children omit all of the Proppian functions comprising the introductory segment of a magic tale, that is, interdiction, violation, reconnaissance, delivery, and trickery. That is all the more surprising, since precisely these functions play a central role in children's fairy tales like "Red Riding Hood," "Snow White," "Little Brother and Little Sister," and "The Wolf and the Seven Kids," where the hero's dilemma is determined by the violation of an interdiction or by being deceived by the villain's trickery.

In composing their tales the children consistently reject motifs that suggest either guilt or incapacity in the protagonist. The heroes of children's fairy tales are always victims of alien powers, never victims of their own mistakes. Commands, which in any case usually play a subordinate role in their fairy tales, are *always* observed; curiosity is *not* punished, but rewarded (!); the villain's trickery fails (because of the hero's cleverness) or else is successfully averted. Characteristics of the protagonist which in the European magic tale would appear as weaknesses are either completely omitted or emphatically justified. This includes even those actions that an adult would find immoral. Everything the hero does is good and right, because the hero does it.

This is not the articulation of a naïve morality, but of no morality at all. The fairy tale is a mental game, in which the world is arranged as the child thinks it ought to operate: every action of the hero(ine) carries within itself its own justification. Errors and unsuccessful efforts are palmed off onto other characters, often parents. In their stories as in their games, children utilize compensatory tactics. Embarrassments, being domineered over, and being reminded of weakness or incapacities in everyday life are experiences that the children overcome in their fairy tales by introducing reversals. If, for example, the protagonists have run away from home, then what follows is a *parental* catharsis, in which their elders come to their senses, acknowledge their faults, and promise the children never again to be angry and "always to help with the

housework.” This is one constellation that is completely atypical for the European magic tale (with the exception of Grimm No. 78, “The Old Grandfather and His Grandson”); and it apparently corresponds to the child’s need to assert itself and to justify autonomous efforts.

### *The Adversary in Children’s Fairy Tales*

Traditional fairy-tale characters dominate the children’s ensemble of adversaries: witch, sorcerer, monster, and giant; it is relatively rare that characters from movies, children’s books, or comics appear.

In children’s fairy tales we encounter male adversaries in four variations.

1. The male adversary abruptly confronts the hero(ine) and without further ado lets the hero(ine) know his (frequently mortally dangerous) intentions. The further development of the plot is completely motivated by the male adversary’s hostile intentions (which are present *a priori*): the hero has never insulted or injured the male adversary or attracted his enmity by misbehavior, nor does the hero intend to attain an ulterior goal via the encounter with the male adversary. For the children it is a question of their heroes’ survival and their independence within a constellation of power and powerlessness, of superiority and inferiority, of force and insufficiency.

2. The protagonist turns the male adversary into the enemy. The adversary demonstrates no likelihood of attacking or of hostile behavior. The protagonist is the aggressor who provokes or forces an encounter upon the male adversary. The two figures are hardly equals; indeed, the protagonist’s inferiority functions simply as a springboard to prove himself to be as strong as his powerful adversary. It is not the protagonist who becomes the adversary’s victim, but the male adversary who becomes the victim of the efforts of the protagonist to assert himself. This narrative ordering only appears in boys’ stories, is not customary in European magic tales, and represents an essential characteristic of the children’s fairy tales.

3. The male adversary is recognized to be a harmless creature, a situation which is equally foreign to the European magic tale. If a threatening monster turns into a partner (groom or friend), as in the animal bridegroom tales, then it occurs by means of a magical transformation. In the children’s fairy tales, however, the creature who initially occasions fear and trembling retains his original shape, but reveals his true nature to the hero as softhearted, helpful, and friendly to children. A remarkable affinity is created in the meantime between the protagonist and his apparent adversary: the monster confesses his woes to the child-protagonist, whether loneliness or sadness or a longing for a lasting friendship. The conflict here proves to be a pseudoconflict, with the imbalance of power being bridgeable by their common interests. Whether these fairy tales represent protoanimal bridegroom fairy tales is open to question, since in these cases eroticism never comes into play in contradistinction to many other fairy tales. These fairy tales seem linked to children’s real world

experiences, for example, the fact that the monstrous need not always indicate danger, or the fact that the child desires a strong protector, whose threatening appearance is the best guarantee for protection and security.

4. In the fourth variation, which is written almost exclusively by girls, the resemblance to animal bridegroom fairy tales is unmistakable. The heroine [*weibliche Hauptfigur*] is panic-struck when confronted by a prodigious monster, and fear initially paralyzes her capacity to respond. Eventually either the monster or someone who advises the heroine begs her to rescue the monster by performing a daring deed to break the spell he is under. As is to be expected, the repulsive creature then becomes a Prince Charming.

Female adversaries appear above all as witches or stepmothers. In the children's fairy tales witches are extraordinarily opalescent figures. They do not at all resemble the prototype of "female evil." Occasionally a benevolent good-natured friendly creature exists behind the crooked nose and warty chin, and conversely a child-hater can lurk within dazzling beauty. On the other hand, such polarized characterizations are sometimes relinquished in favor of witches who are capricious and unfathomable: a single character who aids, advises, and also chastises. Other female adversaries are disdained outsiders, banished and lonely. Yet others are humorously odd jokers. This catalog does not exhaust the range of witchlike characteristics created in the children's stories. In the cast of traditional fairy-tale characters in children's fairy tales, none takes on so many guises as the witch, and none is further from unambiguous and easy moral categorization.

In the Grimms' fairy tales a stepmother functions fundamentally as the explicit enemy of the hero or heroine. Children do not follow this example in the fairy tales they invent. The stepmothers in children's fairy tales can be divided into three groups:

1. They are mercilessly wicked, whereby the list of their vices demonstrates real, here-and-now qualities rather than magical characteristics.
2. In the course of the story the stepmother undergoes a positive transformation, that is, the children in these fairy tales accustom themselves to the new mother, whom they initially feared, but in whom they then discover increasingly appealing qualities.
3. The stepmother is from the very beginning a kind and caring partner of the child's.

It is evident that children don't simply and mechanically appropriate the evil-stepmother prototype traditionally offered to them, but that they create their own personal version of the stepmother.

Questioning revealed that the image of these stepmothers corresponded to a very great extent to the relationship the children had with their own mothers: in this study children with a stable and positive bond to their mothers generally wrote fairy tales whose stepmother figures they viewed in positive terms.

Conversely, children with conflicted relationships with their mothers painted the stepmother in dark and threatening colors.

These results suggest strongly that the wicked witches and stepmothers of fairy tales are not experienced exclusively as doubles, that is, good mother and bad mother (Bettelheim 1980), in circumstances which are burdensome at a particular time, but rather that these figures are able to embody and express a child's basic attitude toward its mother or other primary caregiver. The respective images of witch or stepmother in children's fairy tales seem to be an expression of generalized experience. These traditional figures are ciphers with whose help a child makes its individual experience of life communicable. Stepmothers and witches are not utilized as stiff patterns, but as dynamic models in whom alteration, modification, and individual variation are all possible.

In the children's fairy tales the antagonist's demise also looks different from the way it appears in the Grimms' tales. If the protagonist has succeeded in escaping the antagonist's power, then the antagonist simply fades away and loses significance, disappearing from the plot as soon as it ceases to represent a danger to the hero or heroine. From the 19th century onward (except in the tales of Ludwig Bechstein), this manner of disposing of the antagonist is alien to the European magic tale where the action only ends when the antagonist has been punished or destroyed (Bottigheimer 1990).

The antagonist is physically destroyed in fewer than 20% of the children's fairy tales. In girls' fairy tales the malefactors generally escape unscathed: they are destroyed in only 11% of their fairy tales; in 24% they are not. (In the rest of the girls' fairy tales, there are harmless antagonists—or none at all.) Antagonists have a harder time of it in boys' fairy tales. On the average their adversaries pay with their lives in 21% of their fairy tales, but do not do so in 16% of them.

The forms of death that children invent in connection with their malefactors do not in the least resemble trials for capital crimes as they are historically known (Becker et al. 1977) and as they were taken over by Wilhelm Grimm (and others) as a means of punishing evil (Tatar 1987). The children invented comparatively harmless demises. Only in the case of imaginary creatures, especially dragons, do heads roll. Otherwise the enemy's heart splits, or else he dissolves in smoke or turns to ashes or to stone. Not a trace of sadistic blood-curdling revenge, no perfidious cruelty, no aggressive retaliation. Parents' and teachers' concerns that fairy tales might nourish vengeful fantasies in children and that they might condition children to cruelty prove themselves to be unfounded, at least to the extent that one may draw conclusions from the children's own fairy-tale compositions.

### *The Trials of the Protagonist*

From the broad range of motifs that the children utilize for tests and trials, I shall here examine the motif of battle. Clear gender distinctions are evident: girls reserve battle exclusively for male protagonists. Girls do not produce a

sword-swinging heroine who kills a monster. If in the girls' fairy tales a girl takes up a sword or dagger, then she doesn't use it to destroy an adversary, but to disenchant or to awaken him to a new life in his own shape. A sword in her hands is not an instrument of death but of transformation and resurrection. (Only in a single fairy tale by a girl does the heroine stab her stepmother to death, and then in a symbolic manner.)

Battle appears in the boys' fairy tales three times as frequently as it does in the girls' fairy tales, and it is not limited to the heroes. There is a whole series of heroines who appear initially as weak little girls, but who turn out to be doughty warriors.

The battles imagined by the children are often actually ingenuously constructed assertions of independence, for the hero's weapons are clearly unequal to the force that threatens him. The notion of gaining victory with such simple weapons corresponds to the child's sense of omnipotent ability to alter the course of the world by means of barely perceptible magic wishes (Piaget 1980). On the level of the fantastic, the child writers assert their own omnipotence, for without being as strong as the valiant fairy-tale hero, they nonetheless accomplish the same deeds, but with utterly simple tools. If neither magic nor fortuitous intervention nor deceit comes to their aid, then the battle is carried on with archaic weapons: club, bow and arrow, sword, dagger, or rocks. Gun battles, an integral part of boys' play, do not appear in their fairy tales. The fairy-tale hero does not dish up slaughter, nor does he riddle his opponent with bullets. He is an archaic combatant, whose characteristics do not match those of television or comic strip heroes. Although children take undeniable pleasure in media heroes, they are not assimilated into the mores of fairy tales.

In girls' fairy tales forms of self-defense exist only in conjunction with heroes who have generally outgrown childhood. Girls devise other "weapons" for their heroines. For example, their female protagonists withstand trials via various forms of positive social behavior (altruistic assistance, fulfilling requests, selfless deeds) or via the practice of magic or the use of charms.

The children's protagonists prove themselves differently according to the gender of the narrator. In tales with an external conflict, the boys' heroes prove themselves *against* someone else, that is, in a confrontation, while the girls' heroines prove themselves *for* someone else, that is, in cooperation. (Such forms of proving oneself *for* someone else take place three times as frequently in girls' fairy tales as in boys' fairy tales.) The cooperation of the girls' heroines requires just as much courage, self-control, and active involvement as battles do of the boys' heroes. The girls' heroines do not in any sense resemble the Grimm image of the woman, which Bottigheimer and Tatar analyze critically (Bottigheimer 1987; Tatar 1987). On the contrary, they lack all trace of long-suffering patience, a trait that distinguishes the humbled and persecuted heroines of the Grimms' tales, for example, "The Girl Without Hands" (No. 31), "Rumpelstilzchen" (No. 55), "The Goosegirl" (No. 89), or "The Goosegirl at the Well" (No. 179). The girls' heroines are never condemned to silence, as,



for example in “The Six Swans” (No. 49) or “Mary’s Child” (No. 3). On the contrary, they have sharp tongues and are not even intimidated by the threat of torture. They suffer from no lack of self-confidence or readiness to act, but their means for asserting themselves differ from those of the boys. In particular, self-defense in tales by girls is less about eliminating an opponent than about winning a partner, principally a fiancé (less often a friend), and it is precisely here that the girls’ heroines locate their confirmation of self. Similarly, in many of the conflict situations described by girls the search for partnership and the longing for bonding and support play central roles. Many of their narratives are pure love stories. While in the boys’ fairy tales no symbolic terms or even marginal meaning attaches to love or eroticism, erotic fantasies are clearly articulated in fairy tales told by girls. The fairy tales’ images and symbols clearly offer them culturally acceptable paradigms with which they can freely express erotic daydreams.

### *The Endings of Children’s Fairy Tales*

About two-thirds of all the children in the study wrote fairy tales in which the protagonist returns home at the end. Thus, the majority of children do not refer back to the separation of the protagonist from the family that is typical for the European magic tale. It is far more the case that the heroes and heroines invented by children are and remain bound to their parents with every fiber of their being. Returning home in the children’s fairy tales means more than the simple closing of the circle of narrative action. The return home transforms a situation of conflict and crisis into a fictional life- and world-order that is free of contradiction, a “tension-free permanent state” (Bausinger 1987:81). The golden age opens with the hero(ine)’s return to the parental home. For them the parental home is the center of the world; there is no better place. The strongest symbol of a social utopia is the harmonious nuclear family. Even when the protagonists have proved their grown-up status in battle, courtship trials or in fairy-tale initiation rites, they still return to the place of their origins to enjoy complete happiness in their parents’ embrace.

In the face of such strong evidence for the meaning which the family is accorded in children’s worldview and social value system, the thesis that fairy tales assist children to resolve conflicts involved in *separating* from their parents (Bettelheim 1980) seems at the very least problematic. Final separation from their family is a challenge that is not yet existentially or necessarily central for children in this age group. In the children’s fairy tales survival and successfully surmounting dangers and damages represent a coming to terms with here-and-now anxieties and afflictions. These children’s fairy tales do not describe tests for adulthood. They are, however, about self-knowledge, confirmation of identity, and coming to terms with fears *within* childhood. The children do not anticipate developmental or life-cycle problems that set in at a later point in their lives. Their dragons, monsters, castles, and bridal couples are not pro-



jections of future dangers and longings, but are symbolic reflexes of their immediate experiences.

In approximately one-third of all the children's fairy tales the destiny of the protagonist is made manifest by a concluding accession to the throne. In the European magic tale the hero must generally withstand a supplementary trial after the main one (often manifested in the Proppian functions of the difficult task and its solution) before he can mount the throne. According to Holbek this test is not a second and dispensable sequence in the narrative, but represents the point at which the hero has to defend his new social status (Holbek 1987:378). Only by surmounting the social cleavage, low/high (social elevation of the hero, mounting the throne), can the surplus condition typical for the European magic tale be achieved, a condition that stands for more than a simple amelioration of the initial disturbance of equilibrium. In telling their stories the children in this study excluded the second trial. That should not be understood as part of a tendency to abbreviate their tales, but as the result of the dimension low/high having neither social nor, in the final word, psychological meaning for them. In the children's fairy tales, social status symbolizes the protagonist's psychological situation: "low" means lonely, abandoned, persecuted, or threatened; "high" means victorious and happy.

Thrones in the children's fairy tales symbolize having dealt successfully with individual dilemmas. In the children's fairy tales, enthroning the hero has no social relevance. Only in five fairy tales is an unjust, that is, a greedy, king replaced by a good king. Although the representation of aspects of social utopia (Oberfeld 1986; Woeller 1984) and of class-related experiences in the folk-tale are both decisive for folk writing [*Volksdichtung*], they play no role in the children's fairy tales. That is all the more astonishing, since the children grow up with such fairy tales and also because precisely these aspects are strongly emphasized in current fairy-tale films, fairy-tale plays in theaters, and above all in pedagogical practice in the G.D.R.

The figures of monarchs can only be ciphers for a generalized human ideal for children who grew up in a socialist state and who, at their age, do not yet have a pronounced historical consciousness. For these children, monarchs do not represent power within an antagonistic class society as they do for adults with a historical awareness. In their tales monarchs are the incarnation of an aesthetic-ethical ideal of the perfect human being. The boy finds his ideal embodiment in the prince or the king, the girl in the princess or queen. Through these figures, the children assert and defend the conviction that they harbor a king or a queen in themselves, a conviction which protects the child against discouraging day-to-day experiences or pedagogical practices that level them out or produce anomie. On the other hand, elevation to the throne is synonymous with the final and irreversible resolution of the fictional enchanted condition, the end of a ludic event in which the hero's or heroine's enthronement is part of a fixed set of rules.

### Concluding Remarks

Analysis of the structure of fairy tales told by the children in this study demonstrates the power of the genre and its ability to survive among child storytellers in the 20th century. Analysis of the content of the children's fairy tales reveals not the slightest glimmering of an effort to elaborate questions of social justice, morality, the relationship between good and evil, or power as a social category. On the other hand, the children's tales suggest a more highly differentiated and nuanced view of the characters they create than has been suggested by the often-cited good-mother/evil-witch dichotomy.

The children's tales seem to serve their need for vehicles for their own imagined heroism. In their own way they prove the subversive potential of traditional fairy tales: in articulating a model counter to their own realm of experience and in postulating an alternative to the world that they experience, children may rid themselves of feelings of inferiority. In this manner the child plays with reality free of the risks inherent in the everyday world.

The extent to which the results of this study are valid for children of the same age whose socialization has occurred under other social conditions can only be ascertained by further, comparative, studies. Only with reference to such studies would it be possible to determine the extent to which the gender differences that emerge from these children's tales, for example, represent an anthropological principle at work or a social mirroring of conscious and unconscious child-rearing strategies in a given society.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>In German the use of "es" for "das Kind" is perfectly natural and results in a truly gender-neutral statement. I have retained the usage, which is somewhat awkward in English, in order to clearly render the gender-neutrality of the story opener.—Trans.

<sup>2</sup>This term generally refers to the classic fairy tales familiar to most readers in the form in which they exist in *Grimms' Tales*. Good examples are "The Frog Prince," "The Sleeping Beauty," "Red Riding Hood," and "Hansel and Gretel."—Trans.

<sup>3</sup>"Minimal" and "maximal" refers to the number of component plot elements of which the children's tales consist.—Trans.

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### Appendix: Representative Children's Fairy Tales

In the following tales, the story opener provided by the teacher appears in boldface at the beginning of the tale.

#### Text 1

**Once upon a time there was a child, who was playing on the shore of a lake. Suddenly it' turned pale from fear, for waves rose and the water foamed. . . .** The child, it was a princess (*Königskind*), was pulled into the river by fear. Just then a fairy came along. When she saw that the child had a crown, she could tell it was a princess. She quickly took a wand, waved it, and said, “The princess shall not drown.” She squeezed her eyes shut, and when she opened them again, the princess lay in front of her. When the child woke up, the fairy had been gone a long time. She went into the castle and told her father that the fairy that had saved her had had a magic wand. It was late, so the father said, “Go to bed, it's late.”

As always the lady-in-waiting told good-night stories. This time Mirabell, that was the princess's name, wanted to hear a story about a magic wand. The old lady-in-waiting said: "If you would like to have a magic wand, then you have to perform three good deeds." From this day on the princess thought about good deeds. One day it started to rain. Mirabell sat at the window and looked at her dog Bobby. The poor thing, she thought, because Bobby was tied up and was freezing cold. Finally it stopped raining. All the ladies-in-waiting hurried to the movies. Mirabell went to untie Bobby. Then a strange man came along the path. He said, "Dear child, what have you done? You've untied Bobby, and now he's gone." Suddenly the strange man disappeared. But Bobby sat on the tree and was a bird. A day later the strange man came back. But this time his beard was much shorter. It only went to his chest. He said, "What have you done?" Suddenly he disappeared as though the earth had swallowed him up. Mirabell looked around and saw Bobby, who was now a sheep. The next day the man came, and he looked much, much younger. His beard only came to his chin. He shouted, "What have you done?" And again he disappeared immediately. Mirabell looked around and saw Bobby, who was now a frog. The next day a coach came by. In the coach sat a prince. Then they got married and lived together happily.

Girl, Class 3 (age 9)

## Text 2

**Once upon a time there was a boy who had grown up. He left his parents and went out into the world.** . . . He wandered and wandered, until he stood in front of a castle. Black flags were hanging at every window, and there wasn't a sound. Ivan wondered what it meant. Finally he went into the castle. Everybody was dressed in black, and there was deep mourning everywhere. Then Ivan went to the king and asked what that all meant. He said, "Oh, my boy, the story is too long to tell. Listen well. My daughter is a beautiful princess. One day the dragon king came at night. He has a very wicked heart. The dragon king has a son, and he wants to marry his son to my daughter. Lots of princes went out to rescue the beautiful Daneshka and to make her their wife. But none of them did it. Would you please try? I'll show you a picture of her, so that you know what she looks like." He led Ivan into a room and showed him the picture. Ivan was amazed at her beauty. He got on the way in search of Daneshka the very next day. It didn't take long until he arrived at the dragon castle. There was a tower on it, you could hear a wonderful sweet voice from the tower. It was Daneshka. The wicked dragon king had had Daneshka locked in the tower. Ivan wanted to serve Daneshka. He went to the dragon king. The king of the dragons listened to everything. Finally he agreed and said, "Under one condition. You have three nights to rescue the beautiful princess. My son guards her. If you can rescue the princess in three nights, and if you have defeated my son, then the princess shall be yours." In the first night Ivan fought with the dragon son. He defeated him in the first night. The dragon king got furious and turned into stone from his anger. Ivan went with Daneshka to the castle. There they celebrated the wedding. Ivan and Daneshka lived happily til the end of their lives.

Girl, Class 4 (age 10)

## Text 3

**Once upon a time** . . . there was a girl who was six years old. Her parents were rich and powerful. Once, she was alone at home, and nobody wanted to play with her. That was boring! She got the idea to go into the woods. She went past a gap, and suddenly a big storm blew up, and she was very frightened. She looked at the cloudy sky. Then it lightnined and she fell down.

When she woke up, she couldn't see. She was blind. She wept bitterly, "Oh, how will I find my way home? Wild animals will eat me." A woodcutter heard all that. He asked himself, "Where is that voice coming from?" And he went toward her. The girl grew up in his house, and he took care of her and protected her until she was sixteen years old.

One day a young prince was hunting a handsome roebuck. Suddenly the roebuck disappeared, and the prince got lost. But his horse was so weak that it couldn't go any more. Then the prince fell off the horse, and he shouted, and the woodcutter and Adela heard it and carried him home. They took care of him, and Adela got two drops of blood on her arm. When she wiped the sweat off her forehead, the drops [of blood] ran into her eyes. But her blood and his didn't get along, they whirled everything up. At first she thought she would die from pain. But suddenly she could see! When the prince was on his feet again, he took the woodcutter and made him a royal servant. And Adela? Adela married the prince and they lived happily. And if they haven't died, then they are still alive.

Girl, Class 4 (age 10)

#### Text 4

**Once upon a time there was a boy and a girl, who liked each other very much. But their parents couldn't bear to see them together. Therefore one night they secretly left home . . .** and suddenly they came into a deep forest. They are both very tired, and they haven't taken anything to eat. Therefore they lie down in the soft moss and fall fast asleep. In the morning they both wake up and go further. Suddenly they are at a big lake, and the brother says, "We have to build ourselves a raft." He takes his ax and starts to chop, but suddenly the tree is gone. And he wants to start on the next [tree]. Suddenly he sees an old crippled witch, and she says, "Hey, fellow, listen. You can get over the lake, if you perform three tasks for me. The first is, empty the lake and lay all the fishes on land and show them to me. You have to do it by tomorrow morning." And the witch gives the boy a little red mug. The boy scoops and scoops, but he doesn't get any water out of the lake. And now the boy looks more closely at the mug, and he sees that the witch has given him a thimble. He thought, there's another way, and he went into the woods to whittle a proper mug. And he comes to the lake again. And now he starts his work. In the morning the old witch returns to check everything. And she sees the lake is empty, and eight fish lie on the sand. The witch is amazed and asks how he had done it. The boy doesn't answer her. "The second task is to climb up the glass mountain." And they go and go until they are finally there. And the witch has disappeared again. The boy tries to climb up the mountain from a run, but he always slides back. Then he sees a beehive and looks into his bag. He sees a piece of sugar, and swaps with the bees. He gives them the piece of sugar, and the bees give him honeycombs, and he puts the honeycombs on his shoes and climbs the mountain huffing and puffing. And in the morning the witch appears again and is amazed. "And the third task is to cut down that whole woods over there." And the boy gets an ax from the witch. And the boy gets to work. He starts to swing. Suddenly the head flies off, and the boy doesn't spend much time worrying and takes his ax and cuts the woods down. In the morning the witch appears again and is amazed. And she turns to ashes then. And the boy rescues his sister. And they went home. The parents were now peaceable again. And if they haven't died, then they're still living.

Boy, Class 4 (age 10)

#### Text 5

**There was once a child, who played with her<sup>2</sup> favorite toy. Then her mother called her in to eat. When she came back, the toy had disappeared, and instead a black stone**

**was lying there** . . . and when she looked up, she saw a dark, black cloud. The girl's toy was hanging in a corner of the cloud. Then she cried a lot and went to her mother. She begged her mother to get the toy back. After a long while the mother said, "Okay, go and get your toy." The girl didn't wait to hear it a second time and wanted to go to the cloud right away, when a little drop of water fell right on her head from the big cloud. Suddenly her head changed completely, and she said to herself, "Take along the stone, the walking stick, and one of the birds." She did that and followed the cloud. Suddenly she got very tired and lay down. Then the black stone touched the bird, and suddenly he got so very big that the girl could sit on him. She did that, and now she chased the cloud fast. But, what was that down there? There were thousands of toys of all kinds down there. When the cloud passed over the toy dump, it unloaded the little toy, and the toy flew straight in front of a big gate which was near the toy dump. Behind the gate was a big mountain. On it were hundreds of dark black clouds, and the cloud which had taken away the toy lay down between two other clouds. The little girl and the big bird landed right in the toy paradise. Now they both wanted to see what was behind the big gate. But they didn't know how they should get the door open. But suddenly the gate opened all by itself. Now they saw the most beautiful thing they had ever seen: gold, ducats, silver coins, rubies, quartz, and thousands of diamonds. Yet, what was in front of it? A huge two hundred-headed dragon. How were you supposed to get around him? You had to fight him. But that wasn't simple at all, because he was gigantic. Now the battle started. The little girl began, she took her rock and set it on the walking stick. The walking stick turned into a giant sword that the girl could hardly carry. So she killed the big bird and ate him up. Now the weak little girl had become a big strong girl, and she swung the sword as if it were a walking stick. Then the battle began in earnest. The dragon spit fire, and the girl hacked all his heads off one after the other till none was left. Now there was only green smoke coming out of the dragon's ears. The girl took the sword and went directly toward her good fortune. But she was separated from her fortune by a powerful river. She didn't know how she would get over it. But she found a way. She blew onto the sword until it could be shaped. And now she made a ship out of the sword. She raised the sails, and off went the mail. After half an hour she was on the other shore and she tied up her ship. After that she got on her way to her fortune. Now it wasn't far away any more. Finally she had done it. But now how could she get back home? She saw a store and bought herself an airplane. Now the return trip started. That was naturally easier than the trip here. She packed the gold, the ducats, the silver coins, and all the other things into her airplane. The trip back lasted a week. She stopped at the toy dump and packed her toy onto the diamonds, and then she went home at top speed. Her mother was very happy about her child. And if they haven't died, then she still has the toy.

Boy, Class 4 (age 10)

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup>The child's gender is not specified here. See Note 1 in body of the article. Only subsequently does the child narrator specify the gender.—Trans.

<sup>2</sup>The gender is not specified in the German text at this point. I have replaced "its" with "her" because of the subsequent course of the story.—Trans.